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SUBJECT: Ambassador Discusses Drug Policy, DCA with Polo Democratico Candidate Petro

REF: BOGOTA 3347

CLASSIFIED BY: William R. Brownfield, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA) presidential candidate Gustavo Petro told the Ambassador December 4 that U.S. drug policy was mistaken by attacking illegal drug production but not the political power behind it. Petro argued that land reform was key to rolling back the regional power that trafficking organizations had amassed. If elected, he said he would permit extradition to the United States only if narcotraffickers refused to cooperate with Colombian justice. Petro thought the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) unnecessary and suggested that abrogation of the agreement at a key moment could stimulate peace with Venezuela. Regarding his candidacy, he held out hope for a vote in March among Liberal Party and PDA members to elect a unified candidate for the May 2010 elections. Petro believes the leftward tilt of his presidency would strip the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) of its ideological arguments for armed struggle and would leave the group exposed as mere narcotraffickers. End summary.

Fighting the Wrong Drug War

¶2. (C) At a breakfast hosted by Ambassador Brownfield on December 4, Senator and presidential candidate Gustavo Petro attributed Colombia's illegal drug problem to the persistence of "mafias" that had permeated all levels of the GOC. He acknowledged that the large cartels that operated prior to Plan Colombia had been dismantled, but asserted that this had only metastasized the illegal drug trade throughout Colombia and left the drug industry without prominent leadership structures. This dispersion had spread narco-corruption to regional power centers that, he explained, had overwhelmed the power of the central government to respond. He noted that in the days of infamous drug lord Pablo Escobar, only one congressman -- Escobar himself -- had been linked to narcotics trafficking; today, one third of the Congress is implicated. He concluded that Plan Colombia had erred in attacking coca cultivation and cocaine production while permitting the narco-links to the GOC to go unchallenged. Petro said the mafias' political power was a much bigger concern than coca production. The Ambassador pointed out the latest statistics showing reductions

in cocaine production as well as rising street prices and falling cocaine purity in the United States. He noted that the USG had since 2008 begun to increase assistance to the justice sector, which enabled it to investigate narco-ties to politicians.

Land Reform Will Break Narco-Power

¶13. (C) Continuing his theme of "mafia" dominance in rural areas, Petro said the GOC's democratic security policy had allowed narco-traffickers and their collaborators to amass ten million hectares of land (compared to five million hectares of total agricultural land in Colombia). This control of the land translated into political power for the narco-industry. He argued for a transitional justice regimen that would expeditiously strip land from such people and return it to their rightful owners. Petro said this would not be agricultural reform, but rather the granting of clemency to criminals in exchange for the criminals returning land to the government. Since the Congress was in the criminals' pocket, Petro said he might have to bypass the legislature to enact by decree the necessary reforms.

Extradition as a Last Resort

¶14. (C) Petro said he preferred that narco-traffickers and demobilized paramilitaries stand trial in Colombia. He said that if elected he would reserve extradition for those who failed to cooperate with Colombian justice. He said the current practice carried out the extradition too quickly, before the defendants reveal the extent of their involvement with GOC authorities. Petro raised the issue of access to extradited paramilitaries currently in U.S. prisons. The Ambassador reiterated the actions taken by the USG to facilitate such access to Colombian legal authorities. Petro suggested that the USG also provide visas or refugee status for close relatives of the extraditees, which he claimed would stimulate paramilitary participation in the Justice and Peace Law process.

DCA: Bases are Unnecessary

¶15. (C) Petro quipped that the DCA, which grants U.S. access to seven Colombian bases, was not necessary and represented an error by the GOC that inflamed tensions in the region. He suggested that the DCA could serve as a bargaining chip in some future peace discussions with Venezuela. He explained that just as the reduction of U.S. assistance in Central America at the end of the 1980s helped pacify that region, an agreement to walk back the DCA might incentivize Venezuela to strike an agreement regarding its security relationship with Russia. In response, the Ambassador walked Petro through the practical effects of the DCA on U.S.-Colombia bilateral cooperation, pointing out there would be a minimal change to the U.S. footprint as a result of the agreement.

A Polo-Liberal Alliance?

¶ 6. (C) Asked about press speculation over possible opposition coalitions against President Uribe (or his preferred successor) in the May 2010 elections, Petro expressed interest in a "consultation" vote of PDA and Liberal Party (PL) members, possibly in March, to pick a unified candidate. He described the PDA as having the stronger candidate (Petro, who earned the second highest national vote total for the Senate in 2006 and the highest vote total for the House of Representatives in 2002) but a weaker infrastructure. Conversely, he said the PL had the weaker candidate in Rafael Pardo but possessed the political machinery to wage a nationwide campaign. He said the PL party congress scheduled to start in two days was the first step to a PDA-PL vote. Asked whether the ideologically distinct parties could agree on a unified campaign, Petro pointed to the Concertacion in Chile as an example of diverging political movements working toward a common cause. Petro acknowledged he saw no chance of joining forces with centrist candidate Sergio Fajardo. (Note: Divisions between Petro's more moderate faction and Gaviria's more leftist followers within the PDA have complicated the PDA's efforts to agree on a platform and to select new party leadership. Petro has very low favorability and very high unfavorability ratings in the polls, but consistently places among the top three in voter intent for the May 30 presidential elections -- ahead of Pardo. See reftel. End note.)

No Friend of the FARC

¶ 7. (C) At a separate event with foreign diplomats on November 24, Petro expounded on his thinking about the Revolutionary Armed

Forces of Colombia (FARC). He recognized that the public's association of the PDA with the FARC was an Achilles heel, and that his disdain for the FARC had repeatedly led to confrontations with former PDA present Carlos Gaviria. Petro said that under a PDA government, the FARC would lose its ideological reasons for armed struggle, so only the elements focused on narcotrafficking would persist. Like every other leading candidate for the presidency, Petro said he would not resume peace negotiations with the FARC -- a strategy that proved to be a costly political failure in the past. Petro would instead support FARC reintegration into rural society, perhaps even taking advantage of their combat expertise by incorporating them into a rural National Guard and/or as forest rangers.

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